

Brackett, Isabelle (Belle)
interviewed by Angela Riedel on
February 7, 1981, Eastham, MA

#2

Eastham Historical Society-Oral Histories

1 audiocassette (ca. 90 min.)+transcript

Eastham (MA) Town Government--1930's-60's
Eastham (MA) Town Clerk

Interview with Isabelle Brackett
in Eastham, Massachusetts

by Angela Riedel
February 7, 1981

Q: This is a continuation of an interview with Belle Brackett through the Eastham Historical Society's Oral History Project. The interviewer is Angela Riedel. It is taking place in Belle Brackett's home in Eastham on February 7, 1981.

Belle Brackett: As I was saying when we finished the other day, our cabins were located on Route 6 and we were the first people who started in this business. Consequently, we began to get people stopping by and we had many people from Canada, and they were just so friendly. They loved the location. We were located centrally for beach enjoyment, and they would come in and say, well, we'll stay one night. Sometimes the time was extended to several nights, because they enjoyed the location, they enjoyed the advantages we had to offer them, and they enjoyed our sociability. We visited some of them at their invitation in Montreal, and they were just very friendly people. We felt that we made lifelong friends with many of these people who came by to enjoy what we had to offer them as tourists.

Q: Well, what happened when the summer people stayed all year and

became Eastham people?

Belle: There was always more people to replace them. They would come here and decide they liked it, so they would buy a piece of land. The traffic-- you can tell by the traffic on Route 6 today that there was never any problem with new people coming. We used to worry about that too a little bit, wondering, well, who will take their place when they don't come with us any more. There was never any problem.

Q: And then Eastham grew, probably as much a result of summer people coming back and staying?

Belle: Yes. As you can tell by Route 6 as it now is, going through Eastham, with motels, the overnight cabins soon became obsolete and we then had motels. Our cabins have been enlarged by the people who purchased them from us, and they're really cottages now. But the motel business has been the financial bonanza to the Cape, and this is why we appreciate the work that our Planning Board did when we first became--

Q: Organized?

Belle: When we had to conform to the Planning Board rules and regulations. As I said before, we had a wonderful committee, and had they not done their work thoroughly, I shudder to think what Route 6 would be like. It's bad enough now. And there is a movement to extend the business area down there now. Many people think that Eastham should have more business. We're limited in the area that

we can convert to business, and personally I hope that it doesn't go.

Q: I agree. It's such a relief to have beauty.

What sort of place was Eastham to bring up children in?
What were its strengths, and the things you wished it had had?

Belle: Well, I've always enjoyed living in Eastham and we've had the advantages of a wonderful school system. When you're bringing up your children, the school environment is the most important. And the church. And my children were all involved in school activities and church activities. There was never any time to just look for something to do. There was something for the young people in the school or the church all the time.

Q: It was a lot like your own childhood in Orleans?

Belle: Yes, that's true. And then, of course, when they graduated from high school and went away to further their education, of course it was a different life, but on the other hand, conditions in these small towns, due to the fact that several towns went to one school, their environment was enlarged, shall I say. It wasn't too limited.

Q: Right. Did your children all go to school on a bus as the children do today?

Belle: Oh, yes. They attended school in Orleans and the bus stopped by to pick them up.

Q: And did they take field trips to Boston?

Belle: Oh, yes. That was always a big day. And basketball was-- people were very enthusiastic about the basketball team at the high school, and the competition was keen between the towns. This was before soccer or football was played on the Cape. It was basketball. And I can remember my son in particular, who did not play basketball, but he followed the score. They had a tournament and our high school won for this area, and they were going to play in Boston. Golly! Oh, this was just a big, exciting happening in their life.

Q: Did everybody in Eastham go probably?

Belle: Well, buses went. And my son had just gotten his license and he wanted to take the car to school on this particular day, so he did. And it got to be time for him to come home for dinner, and he wasn't at home. Of course, I began to get a little concerned and I called my neighbor, who had a son his age, to see if there was something particular that was keeping the students at the school. And my neighbor said, why, didn't you know that Jay has taken several boys to Boston to see the tournament? And I said, oh. And that was it. And he had just gotten his license. He had never driven in the city before.

Q: Why mothers turn gray.

Belle: Oh, that was really quite an awakening to me.

Q: I'll bet it was.

Belle: He knew I wouldn't give him consent, so he went anyway. But they arrived home safely and all was well. And Orleans had lost the basketball game, so that ended that.

Q: Do any of your children live on the Cape now?

Belle: Oh, yes. They all went away. Betty, the oldest girl, she took a secretarial course at the Hyannis Secretarial School, which was a small school, but it was an accredited school. And she couldn't wait to leave the Cape and she went to Washington, D. C. This was during the war. And got a job down there as a secretary, but she came back to Boston and worked for the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston before she got married.

Phyllis went to work for the airlines. She too went to the same business college, and she became an employee of TWA, until she married.

Judith went to nursing school and she became a registered nurse and married a man she met from Boeing in Seattle, and she has lived in Seattle ever since her marriage.

Jay went in the service. He got a scholarship to attend Boston University, a music scholarship.

Q: Following your father's tradition? Following your tradition?

Belle: Oh, yes. Well, he just couldn't get it out of his system. Jay is another story. His ambition was to become a jazz musician. He played the trombone, and this was his life, and to have an orchestra, which he did, and all. He did not settle into college

at Boston University. He left and joined the service and was in the service three years, stationed in Germany, playing. He sent home-- the first Christmas that he was over there, I got this Special Delivery letter: "Mother, will you please send my trombone. I will pay the charges." So we sent his trombone over, and-- well, his life was very happily engaged as a musician while he was stationed in Heidelberg.

Then he got his degree. He is now down in New Orleans playing as a jazz-- Dixieland jazz trombone player, and also working as a copywriter for a big department store.

Q: That's very exciting.

Belle: Why mothers grow gray. (LAUGHTER) I always encouraged music, but only as a hobby. Not something that you go on and make your living at.

We have some great fun. The whole family is musically oriented and we just got along fine.

Q: That's been a thing to enjoy all these years then. One of the things I wanted to ask you about the other day was what it was like, maybe thinking of your own daughters leading a bit of a different life than you-- what it was like for you being a woman at the time that you were a young married person on the Cape, and the way that your daughters could express themselves, and now the way your grandchildren have a different life?

Belle: Well, I was very proud of my children. I thought I had

wonderful children. They were talented and I encouraged them.

I used to say to Judy in particular, the one who became the registered nurse, it was her ambition to be one. She'd say, well, Mother, how can we afford it? And I used to say, Judy, you can do anything in this world if you really want to do it.

Q: And with your own life you really had.

Belle: Oh, it was a case of necessity with me, and you just figure, well, this is the way things are, we've got to make a go of it somehow, so you just go.

Q: But you did so much, at a time when I don't think there must not have been very many women in public life.

Belle: No, that's true, and there is one item-- I'm going to brag a little bit. When I became the Tax Collector-Treasurer and Town Clerk for the Town of Eastham, I was the first Town Clerk in three hundred years, the first woman Town Clerk. I was the first Clerk that was ever hired in the Town Hall, the first woman Clerk, but I was the first Tax Collector-Treasurer and Town Clerk, a female to be elected to that post, and I thought, well, all right. Well, I just thought, if these men can do this work, there was no reason why I can't. We had wonderful State Auditors, who controlled the accounts and the work at that time, and I had to cooperate with them, and by doing so I did my work the way they expected it to be done and I always loved it. I just loved what I was doing.

Q: And you got a lot of support from all the men that you were

working with?

Belle: Yes. And I have a letter which I was proud to receive from the Commissioner of Corporations and Taxation, and I'll read it to you. I'm very happy to call your attention to the paragraph on page three of the Report of the Audit by the Bureau of Accounts of this Department in respect to your municipality, for the period from April 5th, 1953 to November 2nd, 1954. "The efficient manner in which the work of the Tax Collector has been performed, particularly in securing prompt settlement of the tax and excise levies committed to her for collection, is worthy of commendation. This is excellent in every respect and you and the Town of Eastham are to be commended for the good work that is being accomplished and for the healthy financial condition of your town. Sincerely yours, the Commissioner of Corporations."

I was just so delighted to receive that, and I think it's worth bragging about, don't you?

Q: I do, too. How many towns have such a commendation?

Belle: Well, that's true.

Q: I think that was lovely. I think that's really-- I'm glad that you read that in. When you think as a girl, when you were a young girl in Orleans, all of the battles for women's suffrage was going on in Washington. You know, they were parading. You probably were very young at that point. Do you have any memories of your feeling about women getting the vote?

Belle: No, not particularly. I can remember, it was something

that was brushed off by "this is ridiculous". It just did not make any particular impression on me.

Q: Your mother wasn't a gung-ho suffragette?

Belle: She was not. No, oh no. She was not engaged in political activities at all.

Q: Were any of the women that you knew on the Cape particularly adamant about women getting the vote?

Belle: Well, we always had an active Republican Committee. As I say, the Democrats had not become established.

(TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION)

Q: That was a quick phone call.

Belle: Mostly, women were not too active politically when I was first married and going to Town Meetings. They had very little to say, but as time went on more and more people got involved and got on committees, and got involved in politics that way. Mostly it was all men. I remember, when picking people to serve on the jury, that was always exciting happening, when I was Town Clerk. I'd get a call from the Deputy Sheriff and he'd say, Mrs. Brackett, we're going to choose people for the jury today. I'll be down at ten o'clock.

So, of course, it was up to the Selectmen to choose people from the Voting List to put in the jury box, and they always put men in.

And this might be when I first became conscious of women getting involved in politics. They always put men in.

So one day I said to them, the Sheriff is coming to pick people for the jury. Why don't you put some women in that box, some women's names to be chosen? Well, it didn't invoke too much enthusiasm, but they did put women's names in that box, and from then on they always put so many men and so many women. And they would always choose older men, because they had to be sure that whoever was drawn was not working, so they would have an excuse not to serve on the jury.

And, of course, they only drew names twice a year, because the Court would be in session just twice a year. And many times the Sheriff would-- it was a ceremony when they drew names for the jury box. And, by the way, we had one of the oldest so-called jury boxes in the state. It has a date of 1873, I think, on the cover, and it's a little old-fashioned wooden box, a hand-made box with a lock on it. So they would put these names in this box, and then all the Selectmen had to be present and the Town Clerk and the Sheriff, while we drew these names out of the jury box.

And I remember the one time we were drawing names, the first name-- oh, well, he's dead. Well, they drew another one. Well, he was dead. They finally, after drawing several people who were no longer living-- they finally got the names drawn for the jury. So the next time that the Sheriff called, he said, Belle, I'm coming down today and we're going to draw names for the jury, and for God's sake, will you put some live ones in that box. (LAUGHTER) I loved that. I've never forgotten that.

Q: And then you would have to write them all a letter?

Belle: Oh, yes. This was the Selectmen's duty, that they had been drawn for the jury, and once they were drawn they had to have a very good excuse for not serving.

But that was really a ceremony when they came to draw these names.

Q: So that was your way of perfecting a good bit of social

? Had you ever thought about your doing that? I bet you did some other things along that line too. Did you suggest people for committees? Or things like that? Because you knew everyone.

Belle: Oh, yes. And I used to encourage the Selectmen to put women on some of these committees. And it just gradually evolved into women serving on committees. And then we had a woman Moderator too, while I was-- yes, I think I was Town Clerk when Jean Poole was appointed. She ran for the office of Moderator. That's an elective position. And she got the job. She was the first woman Moderator that we had.

So women have begun to take their place. They're very active in town politics now. They're very efficient.

Q: Right. I think that was an excellent story.

Belle: I loved that.

Q: Now just moving along with things. For instance, we talked about World War Two and the rationing the other day. Do you

remember where you were on Pearl Harbor Day, December 7th, '41?

Belle: I really don't remember that. I remember how shocked we all were. I just don't remember the particular circumstances of that, but it certainly made a big change in the town, because in that period was when the Office of Price Administration was formed and we had to have committees, rationing boards, appointed in each town. And this was really, as I've said before, where I got my start in doing clerical work of that nature.

Q: What about the fear during World War Two that someone would invade the country, with Cape Cod being the closest part to Europe?

Belle: Well, we didn't think of it that way. We just thought of the war being way, way off. I don't think we really realized how close we were to a situation like that.

But life just went on and people got used to having ration coupons for meat and sugar and butter and gas. Mostly gas and oil.

Q: And back to World War One, there was a submarine?

Belle: Yes, in Orleans. Of course, as a girl I remember that very distinctly. And going down to the beach and seeing where the submarine was. I did not actually see the submarine, but it was really a national happening when that took place.

Q: Do you remember the details of it?

Belle: Not really. No, I don't. I just know for days the paper

was full of it and we had all these strangers around town, reporters from different newspapers. And, of course, my father being at the French Cable Station, it was very active.

Q: Now the French were our allies---

Belle: Yes.

Q: You had mentioned the feeling in Orleans about the separateness, of a separate group of people, which I can understand. But they were accepted as allies? As far as that was concerned?

Belle: Oh, yes. It's just that this area being predominantly at that time/^aProtestant locality, and then to have these-- this group of people come in that didn't get involved in our church work, they went to a different church. They were just sort of different, and because they were cable people, they weren't Cape Codders, and they came from France and St. Pierre and--

Q: They were all set apart.

Belle: And they spoke-- between themselves they spoke a lot of French. In fact, my father got very fluent in speaking French, and he would talk to us at home, using his French on us. And so we got so that we could converse in French a little bit.

Q: I had wondered about that the other day. Do you remember any particular feeling about Germans during World War One?

Belle: Oh, yes. The feeling was very intense against the Germans.

Q: How about the people here on the Cape that were of German extraction? Did it extend to them?

Belle: Well, I don't think we had that many. Of course, the French would have been very antagonistic anyway, and because they were part of our community, naturally we were influenced by their thinking. Germans were someone that-- well, you just didn't have any tolerance for at all. This is my feeling growing up. Oh, if someone was a German, on account of the war they were to be despised people, you know.

Q: I thought even German was dismissed as being taught in schools.

Belle: Well, it was not taught in school, period, at that time.

Q: I see. So that wasn't one of your options?

Belle: No. French and Latin were the two languages that were taught in high school. Whether they teach it now or not, I don't know.

Q: I'm not sure about that either, but I think that that was something that happened in many other places.

I was wondering, we hadn't talked about storms that hit the Cape, because surely the weather must be one of the biggest molding factors in anyone's life over a period of years.

Belle: Yes. When the hurricanes came, it was frightening, although there weren't that many. The winters were severe. There's no question about that. Much more so than they are now. And, of

course, we lived through that hurricane period here on the Cape, which was bad. But it wasn't something that we dreaded. Once it was over, well, we survived it, but we didn't sit and wait for the next one.

And then the winters became so mild that people were thinking it's just as well to be on the Cape in the winter as it is to be in Florida. Now in the past few years we've begun to have severe winters again. Like this winter, for instance. It's been a heavy winter for us.

Q: And last winter was so mild.

Belle: And, of course-- well, during the hurricane, when the beach erodes, this upsets us no end. Much more than any-- it's the beach erosion that we're worried about, if we're worried. But then, we can't do anything about it and the government has-- the National Seashore people tried to hold back the ocean and they found they couldn't and they just had to let nature take its course, that's all. It's just a part of living.

Q: Do you go down to the beach after a storm?

Belle: Oh, yes. We've always lived on the beach, and when my children were growing up, we spent many weekends over there, sleeping all night and having our breakfast on the beach the next morning, with a fire, and we've just been beach people always. As a girl in Orleans, we lived in the Town Cove, and it's just part of our life, the beach.

Q: How about going out to sea? This has not been a part of your family?

Belle: No. No, my parents were not beach people either.

Q: But you would listen to stories?

Belle: Oh, yes. Joseph Lincoln, as a girl growing up-- he was my favorite author. I loved his books and the minute the new one came out at the library, the librarian down there knew I was waiting and she'd always, for some unknown reason, see that I got Joseph Lincoln's new book. And surprisingly enough, my son is very much interested in books and reading, and he had never heard of Joseph Lincoln. Mother, I'm not acquainted with his works. It didn't mean a thing to him. And as I read some of Lincoln's books now-- I had a whole set of them-- I can't understand why I was so enthralled with those stories when I was a girl.

Q: I was thinking too about the people around Orleans and Eastham, who would be seafaring people, who might tell you stories. Or did you know anyone who was lost at sea?

Belle: Well, I presume there were people. I just can't seem to bring them into my mind right now. Of course, people here in Eastham were farmers, they were fishermen, they raised asparagus and turnips. That was the occupation, the industry that kept people going. And this was an entirely new existence for me, because my father was not a farmer, and my mother liked flowers and all that, but as far as being a farmer's family, we weren't. So consequently,

in getting married, it was an entirely new existence for me.

Q: So this was where you had your center, rather than, say, the Coast Guard?

Belle: Oh, yes. Yes.

Q: When you think back about all these times that you've had, I wondered if you had felt that you had developed a philosophy over the years?

Belle: Well, I suppose I have-- the church has been a big influence in my life, and in bringing up the children I just made sure that they attended church regularly, because I have found that if you don't have a faith when troubles come, how do you cope with trouble if you don't have a faith. And I think this has been the way I've lived, that if things are intended to be the way they are-- there's someone watching over us and I tried to bring my children up that way.

Q: And the church that you have always gone to in Eastham is the-- ?

Belle: The Methodist Church. When the children became old enough to go to Sunday School, the church was the nearest, and so we just automatically went to the Methodist Church. Not for any particular reason. We went to the Congregational Church in Orleans when I was growing up, but I've always been church-affiliated, and consequently it's meant a lot to me and I think it means a lot to my children. Even although they may not attend church regularly, it's there when

they need it.

Q: And then you sing, and you played the organ?

Belle: Oh, yes, I sing. I remember the lady who played the organ at the Methodist Church, I went through high school with her. She had to play on a little old-fashioned organ at the church, with the two foot pedals. You had to pump it. And suddenly she died and, well, Belle, will you play next Sunday? And I didn't pretend to be a church organist, but I could play hymns. So I played that little organ for the hymn-singing, by ear mostly. But there was no one else.

And then one day the minister said, we have to have a new organ, and the Hammond Organ people had come out with a new spinet electric organ, and he said, Mrs. Brackett, we're getting a new organ, a new electric organ. And I said, well, who's going to play it? Well, you are.

So that was an experiment and I will never forget the first Sunday, because you had all these little gadgets that you had to-- you just didn't depend on your feet. You had to push this and pull that, and I thought I had it down to perfection, what I had to do. Started to play the hymn and no music came out of the organ, and this was the first day with this lovely organ that we had in the church. I just didn't know what to do. And so they had to sing without any organ accompanying them. Oh, was I embarrassed! (LAUGHTE Oh, dear. But anyway, the next Sunday I had mastered it, so we got along after that.

Q: Times you never forget. Well, this is one of those general questions, but if you had life to live over again, would you change anything?

Belle: Well, I probably would not marry as young as I did. When I was married, I was in love with my husband and that's all that mattered. Our parents were objecting to it, but they couldn't do anything with us and they had to go along with it and sign the necessary papers, so that we could go off and get married. And I would not marry again so early.

On the other hand, I wouldn't part with my family. I have a wonderful family. I've been very proud of them and just was delighted in anything that they accomplished, and with all the troubles-- with children come troubles and heartaches, and you just cope with them. When they come to me for advice, this is when I cringe, because I don't feel that I'm a person who can advise someone what to do. I think you just sort of have to find your own way and do the best you can.

If you feel inside that you've done the best you can do and you have a feeling of satisfaction that I couldn't do any better, this is a contentment that you just don't worry, and whatever the children do, well, I've done the best I could do.

As I said previously, I just loved my work, and when the time came for me to retire, I didn't want to retire, but I had this feeling inside, look, you're pushing seventy and the time for you to quit is while you're ahead. So I quit and I've been busy with other things. Doing things that I never had time to do before.

I guess the only thing that I would change would be that I would not marry so early, because you assume so many family obligations and troubles and cares. But my family has been very well worth it all.

(TAPE INTERRUPTION)

Belle: During the Depression, of course, my husband was in business, and there was absolutely no money. Nobody. The shellfish-- you could go down on the flats out here in the Bay any time and get a bushel of quahogs without working too hard. They were lying right on top of the ground practically. You certainly can't do it today, but in those days you could, and they were selling, as I recall, for a dollar a bushel. You couldn't give them away.

Q: You must have eaten quite a few.

Belle: We lived on quahogs. We lived on quahogs. And I had to learn to sew. Clothes and dresses and clothes for my children. There was just no money, and, oh, it was such a depressing time. And then it was when we started to come out of the Depression-- the rest of the country had started to recover, but the Cape was always the last to begin to feel the effects of the new programs that the federal government was instigating, the WPA, and men would be happy to just get out and work on the roads, and they did accomplish a lot of things that needed to be done, thanks to the money that was coming from the federal government.

And as we began to come out of the Depression slowly, my

husband's business did not improve, because people still could not pay their bills. They couldn't pay for the fertilizer to put on the asparagus. They couldn't afford to cultivate their turnips. And, in particular, one summer during the Depression, turnips need, of course, a lot of rain-- they're mostly water-- and we had a drought that summer. And it was just so sad to see the acres and acres of turnips with these blue-green leaves that were all full of holes, where insects were getting at them.

TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO

Belle: And that year was really the beginning of the slide down as far as our personal affairs were concerned, because everybody-- the turnip crop did not produce the income that people were depending on. They had spent the money for fertilizer and worked and cultivated and the turnip crop was a failure. So that was a disaster.

And I think that was really the beginning of the time when people began to forget turnip farming. And the asparagus business, the people in Florida could ship their asparagus up. They had refrigeration which was unheard of. So consequently, when our asparagus was ready, people had already had all the asparagus they wanted from Florida.

So gradually it phased down and people went into bankruptcy and had to look for other things to make a living at. And so consequently, with the federal programs, the town gradually began to come out of it. And this was about the time when I was desperate and when I-- I told you about getting involved as Town Accountant in Eastham. And from then on things began to look up.

And then during the war-- that came along and that made extra jobs, because these programs had to be administered by people and I was fortunate enough to get involved. And the hotels, you know, the inns were screaming for waitresses, and I had never waited on table in my life. Belle, you've got to come up, I'm desperate. So I went up and waited on table at the Southwood Inn. And we had to figure a liquor tax, which was unheard of, but the government had just imposed taxes on alcoholic drinks, and I had to-- well, I loved that work too. And so from then, things began to look up again. They couldn't go down. They had to go up.

Q: Did most people farm with horses and horsedrawn--

Belle: Yes, they did, but I remember when we got our tractor, and, oh, what a wonderful invention that was. You didn't have to go up and down the rows with a horse cultivating. The tractor, you got on it and rode it. It was a great-- but along with the tractor came all the elements of nature, that you had a big turnip field and you had all these turnips growing, but then the drought, and the tractor couldn't do anything about that. But it was a great invention.

Q: Did you have your family car before you had the tractor?

Belle: Yes. A model-T Ford, and I learned to drive with that, and we all had our own cars. That again was another reason that the country store went out of existence, because people had cars. They could go out of town. They could go to a bigger town. They could go to the markets and do their own shopping. They didn't

have to depend on the delivery man coming once a week with a load of groceries.

Q: How long did the family store survive all these vicissitudes?

Belle: Well, let's see. It was in 1940. Well, I guess Brackett's General Store was maybe sixty years old, but it would be in the 1940's that we went out of business.

Q: As much because of the car as anything?

Belle: Oh, yes. And the oldfashioned way of doing business. No bookkeeper. No one to keep track of things. Just a little old-fashioned book, with my father-in-law making all the entries himself, you know. So you can't survive in modern times doingbusiness that way.

Q: But I'm sure it was greatly missed.

Belle: Oh, yes. Oh, people today will say, we used to come down to our cottage and the first thing we had to do was call Brackett's Store and see that groceries were delivered. You know, it was just an old standby, that's all.

Q: And what has happened to the store building now?

Belle: Oh, it was sold, and I think that those people did run an antique place there, but now it's been modernized. I think there are apartments there now.

Q: An interesting development.

Belle: Well, I think-- just before I retired, the computer was being talked about and how our accounts could be streamlined, and even the State Auditors were a little hesitant about saying too much about the computer. But I thought, well, this seems to be the-- what we're going to have to do, so we might as well look into it. The Cape Cod Bank & Trust had installed a computer system, and at just about that time the representatives from the bank came in to talk with me about putting Eastham accounts on computer. And they said, you are the first town-- now here's another first for Eastham. Because he said, you-- we had always done our town business with the Cape Cod Bank & Trust. The Treasurer before me-- that bank was the bank that we did business with, and he said, we're offering you this proposition first, and he explained what the computer would do. No more sitting and transcribing by hand on cards people's salaries, their withholding taxes, their retirement funds. The computer did it all with one operation.

And he just made it sound fabulous, just wonderful. No more adding all these figures. The computer will do it for us. And he said, because you are the first town, if you take us up on this, we will do your work. And as I recall, the figure was fifty or sixty dollars a month. They would take care of all the figures, doing the accounts for the town, as long as we belonged to the system. Unless your payrolls increase to the extent where it's making a lot of extra work for us.

So I brought it up to the town, and we had to ask for money to get started, and I thought, well, I think it's time that we gave

it a try. And so we brought it up at the Town Meeting, and so we went on the computer.

Well, it was-- really, it was a nightmare at first, because they had this new computer in the bank and it was always breaking down. And when you have a payroll to meet and you don't have any payroll to pay from, because the computer was kicking up-- you can't have it till tomorrow, they'd say. Well, it was just-- from one payday to the next was a nightmare. We didn't know whether the computer was going to be working or not. Sometimes they would feed it the wrong information and we'd get the retirement fund where the withholding account tax/ought to be, and, oh, we just-- but we stayed with it, and the bank, they turned themselves inside out, because they were breaking new clerks in on this, who knew no more about it than we did. And we were just getting it uncontrolled, because everybody had to be involved, the accountant and the treasurer and the clerks all had to understand what was happening.

And we were just getting it so that when the payrolls came in, and one of the accounts-- for instance, the retirement, if it didn't add, we knew we could straighten it out with no problem.

And then I retired, and the new Treasurer decided phooey on the computer, we'll go back to the old-fashioned way, and so all that work went out the window. Now they're back on computer again and they're starting where we left off.

Q: I thought that the computer was a new thing, and so this was years ago that you were trying it out?

Belle: Yes. Our's was the first town. Now I think that Eastham

was the only town that wasn't on computer, because all the towns have--

Q: Have to?

Belle: Yes, have to.

Q: Life is too complex without it.

Belle: Yes. And I wouldn't be critical, but sometimes I think young people-- well, I don't know why the town went off the computer really. It was a headache.

Q: It seems like a vision in the last analysis.

Belle: Yes. Yes, and then to hire a girl to just sit and manually fill individual cards out for records. But the new Accountant and his assistant are computer-minded and they've been putting the pressure on.

Q: I imagine that will be the way it'll always be now.

Belle: Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. Once they get their books set up for the computer, it's crazy to go off and go back to this old-fashioned way of doing it.

Q: When you were first the Accountant, have you any memory of how many employees the town had?

Belle: I was the only woman. I was the Town Accountant and the Clerk to the Assessors, to the Board of Welfare, and I have a

wonderful newspaper record of our Selectmen. I've been reading this. All the duties that the Selectmen had to perform. This is referring to the Selectmen. "As members of the Board of Welfare, they gave town help to all people needing help, and then three years ago the state required a special welfare worker, and Mr. Wiley, who was the Chairman of the Selectmen, gave up the job." He did all that.

You see, the state gradually began stepping in and saying the towns had to do it this way. You can't do it the old-fashioned way any more.

And he speaks about the Depression. He says that "the deep Depression hit less hard in some ways on Cape Cod than in other parts of the country. After all, you couldn't starve here, not with shellfish and truck gardens. Eastham had its Depression projects too. Twenty-two women were set up in the Selectmen's office with their sewing machines, and sixty-five others were on recreation and road projects, and many of Eastham's roads were built under WPA on the Selectmen's suggestions to the state. People lived on eleven dollars a week all right, and there wasn't much complaining," / It's a wonderful article.

Q: Where is this article from?

Belle: This is from The Cape Codder in 1955. This was just before Maurice retired. See, here he is on his tractor.

Q: June 9th, 1955.

Belle: Here's the Town Accountant I was telling you about, that

was the officer in the Coast Guard. And she became-- when I became Treasurer, I had to have an Accountant, so she applied for the job.

Q: What was her name?

Belle: Genevieve Schroeder. And you can tell by the expression on her face what kind of an accountant she was, but she was just terrific. But I think with my new position as Treasurer and this new Accountant, I really think that was the start of a change in the Eastham Town Hall, because she insisted that all these things be done properly and she just wasn't about to okay a bill that someone came in and said, we paid fifty dollars to John Jones. She had to have it in writing, and she was a great accountant then. I was lucky to have her, because the Treasurer-- and this is why the previous Treasurer always told me, he was lucky to have me, because we had to be exact with our figures and see that their work was right.

Q: Are there some things the town used to do that it does not do any more, or is it always the other way around?

Belle: Well, of course, the farming is gone. There's no farming now. And there's no fishing really, other than in the summertime, and people go out of Rock Harbor. We're trying to get our marina so that the fishermen can go out, but they go deep-sea fishing. The shellfishing is no longer profitable.

Q: I was thinking of the services that the town used to do that they don't do any more.

Belle: Well, of course, now-- where Mr. Wiley as Chairman of the

Selectmen used to do everything. He was the Chief of Police. We had no policeman. The Chairman of the Selectmen was the Chief of Police. And then he was the Fire Chief. He had to decide, whenever a blaze burst out, whether to call the neighboring Orleans Fire Department or not. We didn't have any fire apparatus, and Mr. Wiley-- I'm quoting from this article-- Mr. Wiley said, we appropriated enough money for three calls a year for fire-fighting. And then someone asked, what happened if there were four fires a year, and he said, well, somehow, we never had more than three. Don't you love that?

And then when Knowles became Eastham's first full-time Police Chief, Mr. Wiley had to give up the only job that he frankly hated, because if someone called for the police, it was Mr. Wiley that had to go because he was automatically the Chief of Police.

Q: I guess there was no crime wave in Eastham then.

Belle: Well, new people were beginning to come in then, and little things which required police duty, which they just automatically do now. It was a big thing if they had to call the Chief of Police.

Q: What had happened in the old days if somebody misbehaved?

Belle: Well, if a man had a little too much tea, the neighbourly thing was to drive him home.

Well, they quote something that I said here. "Maurice almost went to jail himself sometimes, trying to keep someone else out of jail." Which is true. He was finally-- he had to give it up,

because-- but this is a wonderful, wonderful article.

Q: We haven't talked about when the telephone came and what it was like. Do you remember a time without the telephone?

Belle: When I graduated from high school, I worked as a telephone operator one summer in the Town of Orleans. And we used to sit on these long stools in front of this big board, and when someone rang their telephone, the drop would come down and you'd plug in and connect them up with whoever they wanted to call. And, of course, we knew everybody in Orleans. You knew what their line was, you knew by the voice who they were, and you knew who they were calling, and if there was something interesting going on, if the supervisor wasn't there, you'd listen, you know, to hear. This is how we kept up with everything that was going on. And the telephone operators knew everybody. And they'd say, well, I think-- if you called a certain number and there was no answer, she'd come on and she'd say, well, I think she's over at Mrs. Smith's house. Why don't you try there? The operator would say. Unbelievable.

Q: Where was the switchboard located?

Belle: It was in the old Cummings block, the block that burned down, where the Ship Ahoy restaurant is now. That was the Cummings block and he rented a little office to the telephone company. And I enjoyed doing that.

Q: And could you call Eastham then from Orleans?

Belle: Oh, yes. Eastham was always-- a lot of people didn't have telephones, and we had party lines. I think there was a limit of six people on one line, and it rang-- every time it rang anybody, it rang in your house.

Q: And each person had a different coded ring?

Belle: A different ring, yes. There'd be two and three and four and five and six. Six was the limit. They rang six.

Q: Well, now what would be considered a long distance call? Would Provincetown be considered a long distance call?

Belle: Yes. And Brewster and Chatham. Now, of course, I guess that you still have to pay to call Provincetown, but you don't have to pay to call Wellfleet or you don't have to pay to call Chatham or Harwich. It's simplified that much anyway. But I enjoyed working for the telephone company.

Then, you see, in the fall, then I went away to college and had to give that job up. Then, of course, I got married right after that.

Q: You have had a most varied career.

Belle: Well, in reviewing all this I think, well, maybe-- I was talking to the girls and I said, oh, it just sounds so silly, all this stuff, but I said, if I didn't have these scrapbooks, I just wouldn't be able to remember all these things. But you add them all up and it was exciting. I used to play at the movies too.

Played the piano at the movies.

Q: How did you know what to play?

Belle: Well, you just-- of course, I loved the movies, and it only cost ten cents to go. And they had a serial running, "The Adventures of Pauline", and it would be every Tuesday night, and that was one thing-- if I couldn't go to see that, my life was miserable, and somehow my parents would let me go to the movies.

So they used to have this man play for the movies. They didn't have the sound tracks then. You had to read it, and the music was supposed to go along with a love scene or the Indians or something, and they had this man-- his name was Professor Simpson and he was advertised as a one-man band, and he had this contraption rigged up so that with his feet he could make the drums and with something else he'd pull a string and the bells would ring and he'd play. And when Professor Simpson was going to play, oh, that was just a great night at the movies, you know.

So anyway, I remember he couldn't come one night and they had to have someone to play the piano. And another lady, who lives in Orleans, she played quite regularly. So they asked me if I'd play for the movies. And so when the Indians came, I'd da-da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da-da, you know, and you just went along with the movies, and there'd be a love scene and--

Q: And the fact that you played by ear helped.

Belle: And you could see what was-- and sometimes I'd forget what

I was playing, if I was watching the movies, you know. And they used to pay me two dollars for playing for the movies.

Q: Oh, my, that was really a lot of money. Plus you get to see it.

Belle: Yes.

Q: Did your friends tease you about this?

Belle: No, they thought it was great to play for the movies. (LAUGHTER)

Q: In many ways it has paid you to be a pianist.

Belle: Oh, yes. I always loved playing the piano. Never refused, if they wanted me to play, I played. Never expected to be paid for it ever. I was organist for the Eastern Star for a couple of years and organist for the church for fifty. And I did it because I liked it. If this was something I could do for the church, I did it. And I'm sure people were critical, but there was no one else to do it, so I did it. But I liked it. And I still do. We have a lot of fun playing. My girls all play. They all had lessons. So music has been a big part of my life.

Q: I think this has been one of the most delightful experiences, to know all of the things-- did you realize how many times you've said, I really enjoyed doing that, I really loved that? That seems to be the spirit of your life.

Belle: Well, I think maybe now that I've retired, I've gone into these things that I enjoy so much.

Q: The oil painting certainly has been a success.

Belle: Yes. And thanks to Vi Brooke-- she encouraged me. I think she's just been so wonderful, and you're lucky to know people like that, and she has certainly given of her talents. And she's enjoyed it, I think.

Q: This is with the Council on Aging? The painting class?

Belle: Yes. But I have one daughter, who people say, she's so enthusiastic about everything. If something comes up that a group wants to do and they're sort of hesitant about it-- well, not too enthusiastic-- Betty takes it, she thinks that's great. And maybe I am unconsciously, I don't know.

Q: I would suspect so. It has been a real treat for me to see Eastham through your eyes.

Belle: Well, I hope that I've been able to contribute something, Angela.

(END OF TAPE)